



## Characters: Making Them Real

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Tips on creating convincing, memorable characters from Editorial Department founder Renni Browne

Most fiction writers begin a novel or short story by coming up with characters firmly in mind and then building a story around them—or by coming up with a plot and then building the characters. It's not really that simple, of course: an unruly character may at some point dictate a change in your plot, or a good plot development may dictate a change in one or more of your characters. But you're still likely to begin the writing process with your characters or plot worked out in your mind, at least to some extent.

This article is intended for those of you who have started with a plot and are now ready to develop your characters, as well as those of you who are trying to build a character from scratch at any stage in the process or strengthen a key character you know could be stronger.

Every fiction writer hopes to create characters who come alive to the reader, who elicit strong emotions—positive or negative—who make the kind of impact on us that really interesting people in our lives make. Characters we won't forget, characters we want to spend time with.

### How do you set about making them real?

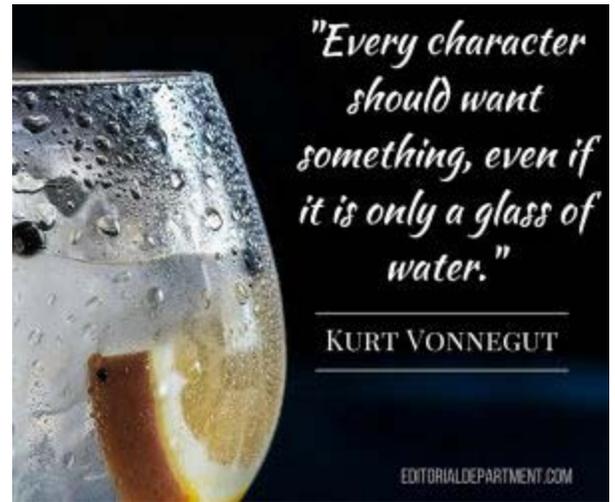
Let's say you have a main character, a man, whose actions in your novel you've pretty much worked out.

First, you have to get to know him. Start by giving him a name—a first name, which you can always change. (You can't give him a last name until you know his ethnicity.) Let's say his name is Tony.

The most important thing you need to know is what Tony wants. Square one: A main character has to want something, and want it badly. Whatever that something is, if you make it important enough to Tony, it will be important to the reader. You're the writer. Your job is to not give it to him and keep on not giving it to him all the way to the end of the novel—at which point you may give it to him but may

not. Depends on your plot. You might even say that the plot and subplots grow out of your answer to this question: what does Tony want, and why can't he have it? Your scenes grow out of his struggles to get what he wants, and the people and circumstances that keep him from getting it.

Let's say your plot (already sketched out) is a legal thriller. You give some hard thought to what your lawyer-hero Tony wants and decide he desperately wants to win every case he can while seeing justice done. Unfortunately, these two goals clash more often than not, which is something any experienced lawyer knows. It says a lot about Tony that he's the kind of person who has a near impossible goal in life. To make matters more difficult, at least one of your plot elements apparently makes Tony's goal beyond any lawyer's reach.



Now take a look at Tony's background.

Ethnic, geographic, size of family, kind of family (loving, abusive, happy, miserable), wife and kids or not. Give him a main identity—decide what he says if somebody who knows his name asks him: “Who are you?” (This tip comes from the excellent Gotham Writers’ handbook.) Tony is one kind of person if he says “I’m a Jew,” another if he says “I’m an American,” and yet another if he says “I’m a lawyer.”

Let's say he's Jewish and call him Tony Seibert. If asked “Who are you?” he'd say, “I’m a lawyer.” Fill in some details. Ask Tony if he's a practicing Jew or if religion means anything to him or if he just shrugs it off. Let's say the only time he ever hits a synagogue is for weddings and funerals.

Now for Tony's personality. What's his temperament? Does he have a sense of humor? Fast or slow speech? Impulsive or not? *How* smart? Competitive, of course. But is he manipulative? Ethical? What are his temptations? Limitations? Easily hurt or does he have a tough hide? Is he guarded or open? Or guarded until somebody is interested in him, then he's open?

Hmmmm. Let's say he has a terrific sense of humor (his dialogue has lots of snap and bite) often turned on himself, speaks fast (often interrupting himself or others), is impulsive, super-ethical within the limitations of his work, really smart....It's up to you. The joy of creation.

Give him physical presence. What Tony looks like will create expectations in the mind of the reader, so use this power wisely. You may find helpful a rough draft in which you overdo it — pouring out even the tiniest details of clothing, facial features, hair, body, feet—and then pare down and down

until you have a description that feels right. In describing his physical presence be sure to include how Tony moves.

Let's say however you get there, you come up with a character you like—or love, or have mixed feelings about. The point is, Tony Siebert is real enough to elicit a strong emotional response. How do you convey what makes him special to the reader? How do you put him over?

By what he does. By what he says. By what he thinks (interior monologue). By how he looks (expression, physical traits, clothes, body language). By narrative summary (unlike actions, dialogue, and interior monologue, narrative summary tells rather than shows, but it can still be an effective option if used sparingly).

## One final suggestion

Here's a method that works for enough writers to be worth a try. Just as you're about to drift off to sleep, fantasize about Tony. Imagine him in highly specific detail: what he's wearing, what he's doing, his face (feature by feature), hair, body. Talk to him—at first generally, then intimately—either as another character or as yourself, whichever feels more comfortable. Then put him in scenes. If your mind gets off the subject, bring it back: the idea is to fall asleep with Tony.

When you wake up in the morning, go straight to your computer. (You can make a pit stop at the bathroom, but don't even make coffee. If you smoke, you can light a cigarette.) Start typing stuff about Tony, giving no thought whatsoever to how it's coming out. Don't bother with sentences, just keep typing. It can be but doesn't have to be dialogue, interior monologue, or stream-of-consciousness. Type even if it's gobbledygook. Something will come. Type it.

You'd be surprised at what you may learn. If you fantasized about Tony just before going to sleep, the chances are that you dreamed about him. Your subconscious could make a valuable contribution to his characterization.

All this loving attention is an expression of how much you care about Tony, and the more you care about him, the more your readers will.



Renni Browne has been an editor for over fifty years and founded The Editorial Department in 1980. She is even better known as the coauthor of *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, its first edition published by HarperCollins in 1991 and still a best-selling craft book for writers. If you have any questions you'd like answered about the suggestions in the piece please click here.

*If you'd like to work with Renni or would like more information about our full menu of editing, marketing, and publishing support services, please visit [www.editorialdepartment.com](http://www.editorialdepartment.com) or call us at (520) 546-9992.*